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ISRAEL'S 5759 (1998) LOCAL ELECTIONS

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On the 21st of Heshvan, 5759, November 10, 1998, Israelis went to the polls to select mayors and city council members to govern them locally for the next five years — that is, some Israelis did. Overall, according to press reports, the turnout was 50 percent, lower than in any previous election in the state including previous municipal elections. However, in previous elections, initial press reports proved to be lower than the actual final percentage. I would estimate the actual turnout to be not much different from that of local elections in previous years, as shown in the following table:

VOTER TURNOUT IN LOCAL ELECTIONS, 1978-1993

Year	Turnout
1978	57.3
1983	58.0
1989	60.0
1993	56.0

Part of the low turnout, no doubt, was because the municipal elections were again held separately from the Knesset elections, as has been the case since 1978. Throughout the world, fewer voters turn out for their local elections than for national or state offices.

But this year in Israel, staying away from the polls was in at least some cases (neither the number nor the percentage are possible to accurately discern) a sign of voter protest by those who believed that none of the candidates were worth supporting. This may have been particularly true in Jerusalem where there was considerable dissatisfaction. This writer heard of cases on both the left and the right, from people of all orientations, who stayed home rather than having to choose between the candidates available.

Haredim and Others in Jerusalem

On the other hand, the haredim (fervently Orthodox) and the haredi-oriented parties such as Shas (Sephardic Torah Guardians) reportedly

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turned out in especially great numbers by working at it. In Jerusalem, at least, they were reported to have reached 80 percent, the same as in Knesset elections. Given the way voters are automatically registered in Israel, this means essentially a 100 percent turnout of all who can possibly vote; that is to say, those who are not bedridden, institutionalized, or out of the country. This compares to a 40 percent turnout of non-haredi Jerusalemites.

The haredi success in Jerusalem — if we include Shas, they won 12 seats on the 31-member city council (another 3 went to the Religious Zionists), to place almost half of the council members in the religious parties — attracted much media and public comment, with claims of an imminent religious takeover of Jerusalem's municipal government, or at the very least a great increase in their power. In fact, the issue is more complicated than that. First of all, haredim comprise 28 percent of Jerusalem's Jewish population. (Very few Arab Jerusalemites vote in the municipal elections because most live in east Jerusalem and stay away so as not to recognize the Israeli annexation of the eastern part of the city, even though the law in Israel and other Middle Eastern countries is that even non-citizens who are resident in a particular locality may vote in its municipal elections without prejudicing their status and citizenship.) Thus, winning 12 seats is not at all demographically disproportionate, especially when they are the only ones who made a great effort to achieve voter turnout. In addition, the 12 seats include Shas voters who, while traditional, may not be haredi even though their leaders are. The three National Religious Party (Religious Zionist) seats should be measured against the 17 percent of Jerusalem's Jewish population (and 12 percent of the total population) that are Religious Zionists. They are actually demographically underrepresented, but then they did not mount a special turnout effort and it always has been characteristic of the Religious Zionists that approximately half of them vote for parties other than the NRP.

Party efforts to stimulate voter turnout are perfectly legitimate in a democracy. In the years when the Histadrut and the kibbutzim were strong, their employees and busses were mobilized at every election to turn out the vote for the Labor camp, which gave it a great turnout advantage over the other parties at the time in a perfectly legitimate way. Thus, it is hard to fault the haredim for making a similar effort.

What is more telling is that despite their effort and the turnout disparity, the haredim did not do appreciably better than they should have done as a percentage

of the overall population, thereby showing their weakness as well as their strength. The truth is that the haredi population has stabilized at 20 percent of the total city population. It has remained that way for more than a decade, despite the high haredi birth rate. This is primarily because haredi young people, especially those who want decent housing, cannot afford Jerusalem prices and move to the near suburbs around the city where apartments cost less or to other parts of the country where the haredim are trying to establish a presence. Recent studies have shown that haredim and hilonim (secular) are the two groups leading the movement out of the city,¹ but haredim with their high birth rate do not lose population in the city as a result, while the hilonim, with the lowest birthrate of all the groups in Israel, by suburbanizing, reduce their percentage in the city's population.

The Collapse of Labor and Likud

The other election result to attract widespread media and public attention was the continued and even accelerated downfall of the two large parties — Labor and Likud — the only two normally considered to be in contention as governing parties. Many independents or members of local lists were victors in these elections, and even where a mayoralty candidate identified with one or another of the major parties was successful, he or she rarely succeeded in bringing in an equivalent number of members of their party into the city council. Once again, Jerusalem is an excellent example of this. Ehud Olmert, the Likud mayor of Jerusalem, won reelection handily with 61 percent of the vote. At the same time, his national party, Likud, gained no seats, and his local party only 3. Shimon Shetreet, the Labor party candidate, so unattractive in the eyes of the voters and who obviously did not have any coattails, not only lost, but only 2 Labor party members won council seats on his local list.

That same situation was more or less repeated throughout the country. In Tel Aviv, the Labor party was in disarray from the beginning of the campaign as the national party attempted to impose a candidate on the city, only to be challenged by Ron Huldai, a local school principal who had an attractive and successful record in the IDF and then in the city's educational system but who was a party maverick. The national party leadership's choice was reluctant to run against popular incumbent Roni Milo, who had come to the city from a Likud seat in the Knesset but who had followed an independent course once elected mayor. When Milo unexpectedly withdrew his candidacy in order to form

a new party to contest for the Knesset and the premiership in the year 2000, Huldai, who had decided to run in any case as an independent, became the favorite, if only because he was the only one running with name recognition. In the end, he had the Labor endorsement as well, but obviously did not feel at all beholden to the Labor party once he won. Meanwhile, the line-up on the new Tel Aviv City Council is Labor 5, Likud 4, Meretz 4, Shas 3, and the remaining 15 seats scattered among nine other parties.

Democracy, the Elite's Way

In the last analysis, both Labor and Likud were reported to have come out the big losers in the elections, with independent and local parties the big winners. This is consistent with earlier trends but was compounded by the major parties' troubles in the largest cities.

The response of the party spokesmen of the large parties and their second echelon leaders was characteristically Israeli. The voters decisively responded to the failing character of Israel's two major political parties, further hastening their disintegration, and the response of the party elites was to call for reinvigoration of their efforts to change the laws that permit the voters to respond as they did. What a model for democracy to set before the Palestinians and the rest of this region on the part of those who are constantly saying that Israel deserves to be supported as the only democracy in the Middle East.

Rather than asking what was wrong with their parties that is alienating the voters and how they could counter that, in true Bolshevik fashion they ask what is wrong with the people and how can the legislators counter them. The result is easy to predict. It will simply further alienate the voters from them.

The people did indeed send the two major parties a message, namely, that they believe that both of them have simply become holding companies for politicians seeking to advance their careers and that what is needed are parties that speak to the public's real concerns. Why should someone from a development town vote for the Labor party just because Ehud Barak apologized to him for Labor's past errors and the party has a platform full of platitudinous social concern, when Shas provides him and his family with direct assistance by subsidizing their children's education? Why should a secular Jew in Jerusalem's Rehavia neighborhood who fears for her city's character vote for one of the major parties that has been making deals openly or quietly with the ultra-Orthodox community for years, and not

for Meretz which militantly fights for an open city on secular lines?

For that matter, why should a Religious Zionist in Rehovot vote for the National Religious Party whose main interest these days seems to be in following the lead of the more extreme settlers in the territories, ignoring the bread and butter issues of the Religious Zionist community whose schools are losing funds to Shas? And so it goes.

The truth is that Israel's major old-line parties have not made a successful transition from the ideological politics of the past to the new times. In the case of Labor and Likud, they have jettisoned most of the ideology and have found nothing compelling to replace it. In the case of the NRP, they have abandoned traditional bread and butter issues to become more highly ideological, but only for one segment of the party and a minority segment at that.

Israel is in the process of rebuilding its politics. The constitutional changes introducing direct election and a politics of orientation rather than ideology are but the first two steps in that direction. The present period of fragmentation is likely to continue until a new leadership group arises who can mobilize sufficient numbers of people behind a party program that touches them. It is no longer possible to expect the public to blindly follow a label for some symbolic reason alone. Shas has learned this. Israel B'Aliya has learned this. But the professional pols of Labor and Likud seem to be content with precisely that Bolshevism that has been abandoned elsewhere and has led to their fall here, and to call for changing the system and the people rather than changing themselves.

Indeed, eight days later, Meir Shetreet of the Likud introduced a bill that would raise the threshold of votes needed to obtain a seat in the Knesset from 1.5 to 5 percent to do just that in the statewide arena.

Meretz and Shas

The other parties that did relatively well were Meretz on the far left and Shas on the religious far right. Meretz did well in the municipal elections for the second time in a row. In most of the country this was because one of its major factions consists of a group equivalent to the European Greens. They are particularly in the ascendance in municipal elections where the peace issue is hardly significant at all and the environmental issues are. Similar to other Green parties, they are environmentally conscious, socially progressive, and fiscally conservative.

In other words, they fit into what worldwide has

become the new politics, often identified in particular with yuppies. In Israel they do well in those cities, particularly along the coast, which have substantial populations with that orientation. For example, the "Our Haifa" list won 4 council seats, while the Green Party in Tel Aviv won 2 seats.

On the other hand, in Jerusalem, Meretz and the Meretz-oriented Left also did well, obviously attracting those fearful of increased religious coercion on the part of the haredim. Because there was a split in Meretz over their candidate for mayor, there was a Meretz list and an independent left-wing list that seceded from Meretz. Meretz MK Naomi Hazan led the Meretz list which gained 3 seats on the city council, while she only secured 4.2 percent of the mayoralty vote. The mayoral candidate rejected by the party, Ornan Yekutieli, led the other list, winning 8.3 percent of the vote for mayor and his list gained 4 seats, giving the far Left a bloc of 7 in opposition to a religious bloc of 15, leaving only 5 seats for the surrogates for the major parties and 4 scattered among three local parties for the remainder.

In Haifa, on the other hand, where Labor's popular mayor, retired Major General Amram Mitzna, handily won a second term, Meretz was challenged by a Green list which won 2 seats that very likely otherwise would have gone to it.

Shas, although disappointed by the election results, did better than ever relative to its past performance. A party whose character is haredi, but whose voters are frequently Sephardim with a traditional but not overly religious orientation, fielded many more municipal candidates this time than ever before and expected to do very well, given its increasing command of state resources for its institutions, especially its youth movement and educational institutions, which provide services to substantial numbers in the development towns and the lower income neighborhoods and thus make inroads in those populations. Shas even had a strong candidate favored to win the mayoralty election in Tiberias, Zvi Cohen. When the votes were in, Shas had done better, going from 90 to 160 council seats countrywide in every major city except Herzliya, but had not won as many as they had hoped and in a close race they lost the Tiberias mayoralty election. Still, they demonstrated that they are a force to be reckoned with in the future.

Thinking Centrist — Voting Extremist

Thus, the third result of the elections was a decline of the center and a move to the extremes, especially with regard to Israel's religious-secular conflict. One

of Israel's great paradoxes has already been noted by this writer and others, namely, that while Israel's voters are overwhelmingly in the middle, they tend to vote for candidates or parties that present more extreme views. No center party has been able to win a significant percentage of Israel's votes since the General Zionist victories of the early 1950s.

When Likud was formed by a union of the General Zionists and Herut in 1965, it was anticipated that the new party would move toward the center and seek to attract the center's voters. While to some extent it has, in fact, as a party its position has become more extreme. The General Zionist voice has been lost and the heirs to the old General Zionists who themselves have long disappeared from the scene have either retired from politics or have left the Likud for other party pastures.

It is symbolic that in the days when the General Zionists were the largest party of that grouping before the merger, the grouping they represented was known as the "civil" camp as opposed to the labor and religious camps. Since the Likud victory in 1977 and the success of ex-Herut in establishing hegemony in the party, it has been known as the "national" camp, a telling change. At the present time, the result of this phenomenon is a growing alienation of the voters who do not find extreme party choices of any kind attractive or compelling and who in these elections began to stay home. Whether or not this is a long-term trend that will affect the Knesset elections as well, only time will tell, although it should be noted that in the last Knesset elections the turnout of the Jewish vote fell to 79 percent, below 80 percent for the first time in years, if ever, and even a point less than the Arab voter turnout.

The New Ethnicity

Shas was not the only successful "ethnic" party in the municipal elections. Yisrael B'Aliya, the Russian immigrant party, also made a major effort to field municipal candidates in this election, indicating that they see themselves as here to stay and not just a passing phenomenon. The results tend to confirm that. They won 92 seats countrywide in 46 municipal councils, including 16 deputy mayor positions, a very credible showing for their first time out. They, too, will have to be reckoned with differently in state politics from now on.

According to news reports, Netanyahu is planning to use his former chief of staff, Avigdor Lieberman, to make inroads in the Russian immigrant vote for the

Likud party. In Ashdod, a city comprised of nearly 30 percent Russian immigrants, Israel B'Aliya won no seats, while an alternative immigrant list backed by Lieberman took 9 of the 25 council seats.

Enhanced Political Involvement of the Haredim and the "Ethnics"

In the last analysis, these elections advanced the political involvement of the haredim. This writer, writing in *Israel at the Polls 1988*, made the point at that time that the new involvement of the haredim was an important sea change in Israeli politics. Whereas before they had been content to live by themselves and sought only to be given minimal support and left alone, their entry into the public arena on an active basis would not only lead to greater successes and demands on their part but also bring them into the political process. That has now happened and one would be hard-put to suggest that they any longer refrain from participating in politics in any meaningful sense.

At the same time, the success of Shas and Yisrael B'Aliya reflect a new vigor in "ethnic" parties, representing the two major, still unassimilated groups in Israeli society. All three of these groups are playing politics in the old-fashioned way, bringing out one vote at a time, while the two major parties have either lost their ability to do that, as in the case of Labor, or, as in the case of Likud, never had it. Meretz, on the other hand, has staked out a place on the moralistic Left, speaking to those who are persuaded by its position on current issues in the peace process, the environment, and the new fiscal conservatism. They, like Labor and Likud, also have jettisoned their old ideologies. Whereas Labor and Likud have not succeeded in convincing the public that they are more than holding companies for politicians seeking political careers, Meretz has attracted a constituency with new ideological or quasi-ideological concerns.

What About Governing?

As far as municipal governing is concerned, the elections, while very much focused on local candidates, did not seem to focus much on local issues. On one level, there seems to be a general agreement among all the parties and candidates as well as the public that the task of local administrations is to provide good government (however defined), economic development, and a satisfying environment (however defined). Individual candidates are left to argue about who can fulfill those

tasks best and "I can do it better" was the major contentious slogan in most campaigns.

In some cases, especially among those smaller parties that did not expect to win mayoralty elections, the second argument advanced was "we can bring more benefits to you, our constituents, than anyone else." That was particularly true in the case of the haredi parties, Shas, and Yisrael B'Aliya, each in its own way. In a situation like this, it is no wonder that independent lists resurfaced and did well.

The national parties offer very little to the voters in the way of being able to better fulfill those tasks, while independent lists, emphasizing that their only concern is their particular locality, have much of the advantage and deservedly so. In campaigns this is a rhetorical advantage. Whether it translates into an advantage in reality depends upon the relationships that the independents, once elected to govern, develop with their counterparts in the state government.

At one time it was clear that certain advantages flowed from municipal officials belonging to the same great national party as was in power in Jerusalem. Today, when ministries are scattered among the hands of numerous smaller parties constantly looking for coalition allies as well as trying to serve the interests of their respective constituents, this is not so clear. In addition, the general trend towards decentralization, which is at least touted in most of the key ministries affecting local government in Israel, may also make the conduct of state-local relations more neutral and less party political. These are matters which we should keep in mind as the newly elected or reelected mayors and councils begin their terms and assume the responsibilities of governing and administering.

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Notes

1. See *Religious Zionists in Jerusalem* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 1998); and Shlomo Hasson and Amiram Gonen, *The Cultural Tension Among Jews in Jerusalem* (Jerusalem: Floersheimer Institute for Policy Studies, 1997).

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